

Celebrating Women of Character, Courage and Commitment
Women's Resource Project
Women's History Month
March 8, 2014

Remarks of Commissioner Mignon L. Clyburn

It is an honor to join you as we celebrate the contributions of countless women who have helped to shape this nation and change the world. Though only a fraction of their works, deeds and stories has ever been appropriately credited or told, we pause this month to honor notables and others, who embody the characteristics reflected in this year's theme.

I am grateful that my dear friend and founder of the Women's Research Project, Barbara Gathers, a recognized author, entrepreneur, and sponsor of so many worthwhile programs that have enriched this community over the years, along with President Gail Womack, invited me to play such a prominent role in today's celebration. And I wish to thank so many of my fellow club members, this afternoon's sponsors, along with family members and friends, for endorsing the Project.

Today's Challenges

There comes a time in every woman's life, when she is faced with a series of choices and challenges. Though the years and the passage of key legislation have made our nation a better place to live, it often seems like we have even more choices to make and additional challenges to overcome.

According to reputable studies, the average person makes about 612 decisions a day. This equates to 4,900 decisions in a week, and 254,800 in a year.

While most of these decisions, deal with the very mundane, like what to wear . . . what to eat . . . which route to take in traffic, and so on, we are also faced with a good number of important and increasingly complex decisions, with meaningful, long-term consequences.

Today, we live in a 24-hour, always-on, connected, digital world. We are logged-on and linked-in. We text and we tweet. We are blogging and downloading, surfing and viewing, listening and communicating in ways never thought possible just a short time ago.

For those of you who run households, your decisions may actually be more complicated by the convenience of technology. If you have children, you face an entire galaxy of decisions. When do you give your child a mobile phone? Do you allow them to join Facebook? And if you find yourself giving in to their constant demands, for the latest technology and gadgets, do you monitor their uses and practices? Do you snoop on their Twitter account, like one of my friends? Or do you trust them to be "responsible" on their own? These are tough choices, indeed.

What about those threshold questions when it comes to values and lifestyle? Many are socially divisive and emotionally charged. Others may cause cultural frictions. Will you keep your maiden name? Who will stay at home with the newborn, take off with the older ones during school closings, and take care of ailing parents?

Say you run a business, or you are an employee like most of us. How do you handle thorny issues at work, when a business partner, co-worker or an employee gets the short end of the stick and you are faced with whether to speak up or stay comfortably silent? What about those women who work in the same job or profession, but get consistently lower pay or fewer promotions?

Or let's say you work in the public domain, or glare of the media spotlight. When things are going well, and the accolades are being heaped upon you, how do you keep your balance and sense of humility?

And what about those times when things get rocky and the critics and haters come out from every corner piling on with speculation or second-guessing? How do you maintain that sense of purpose, propriety and humanity, when your normal instincts are to retaliate in-kind?

Building Character and Courage

I suggest to you that it is during those toughest of moments when our character, courage, and commitment get tested the most and thrown open for the world to see.

For you see, "Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering, can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved," Helen Keller told us.

And I suppose that this hints to the difference between character and reputation. I remember hearing somewhere that we should always be more concerned with our character than our reputation, because your character is who you are, while your reputation is what others think you are... though many are fond of saying that your character is what you do, and how you act, when no one else is watching.

I believe it is almost impossible to separate character from courage, for good character is not formed in a week, or a month, it is created little by little, day by day, through protracted and patient effort. And it takes courage to do the things that separate good character from not on a consistent basis.

The Virtuous Woman

In fact, this is an age-old question. In the Proverbs, we learned that a woman of character is to be upheld, celebrated and blessed. In the 31st Chapter, the woman is a shining role model of value, virtue and character.

Balancing Family, Work and Lifestyle

So as women today face the challenges of work, family and balancing other tasks, I believe, as Maya Angelou, that “Courage is the most important of all the virtues, because without courage, you can't practice any other virtue consistently.”

Today we find women executives – although not nearly enough—women engineers—women in the armed forces—women police and policymakers—and women in our operating rooms, courtrooms and classrooms.

As a new generation of women takes on the challenges and responsibilities of our new information age, to paraphrase a bit, 'we must be braver than we think we can be, for we are constantly being called on, to be more than we are.'

Character for a New Generation

As women of character, courage and commitment, we owe it to our children, others we nurture, our community and our country, to pass on this incredible legacy. In today's world, where we face new challenges, it is important to shore up the bulwarks of character for the next generation to come.

We must promote:

Trustworthiness – the traits of honesty, reliability, loyalty.

Respect – how we treat others as we follow the Golden Rule; tolerance and acceptance of differences; consideration and sensitivity; and leaving vengeance aside, after anger or insult.

Responsibility—upholding our own jobs; doing our best; persevering; taking accountability for our words, and deeds.

Fairness – playing by the rules and leveling the playing field for others less able to do so.

Caring — kindness and compassion for all, especially the least of those among us; gratitude, forgiveness, and help for those in need.

Citizenship — involvement in community; cooperation with others; volunteering, and being a good neighbor.

Of course, we also know that it takes courage to be true to your character, especially when much of the world out there is pushing you to the extremes. I think of that often when it comes to those amazing women who have blazed many trails — Harriet Tubman, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Hedy Lamarr, Madame C.J. Walker, Shirley Chisholm, Eleanor Roosevelt, Sonia Sotomayor, , and countless strong women - made a difference.

It is plain to see that when faced with overwhelming obstacles, they chose courage. And in looking at their lives, I feel compelled to embrace this saying: "Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgment, that something else is more important than fear."

And to be sure, not everyone has an assignment that will put them into the limelight. All of us are not called to be public figures, or will be labeled history makers or trail blazers. And that's quite all right, because most of us are needed as laborers in the vineyard, where we often toil away in the shadows of the sunlight.

And if our work fails to get noticed by the masses, we will maintain the course, for we know that the greatest reward will not be in the form of a newspaper headline or lines inscribed on a plaque. For the admirable qualities of courage, commitment and character cannot be bought or sold. They are not reserved for a select few, nor left to be passed on to those who traditionally inherit the most.

If that were the case, we could not have raised so many wonderful children from all walks of life, and built millions of strong families. The fabric of this country would have ripped long ago, and we could have never weathered life's many storms, if those qualities were only possessed by a chosen few.

Even today, when the headlines are troubling, when our neighborhoods are less than ideal, and the way we treat other is less than civil, I remain hopeful in our power and potential for remarkable change and greatness. "We must not, in trying to think about how we can make a big difference, ignore the small daily differences we can make which, over time, add up to big differences that we often cannot foresee." This quote is from another native daughter, Marian Wright Edelman.

Today, we share those stories, and celebrate the life, legacy and unsung contributions of remarkable women who came before us. We lift and support the millions toiling the acres full of accomplishments and planting the seeds of hope. We seek to guide those who are looking to find their way.

I join them and you, as we keep our heads up, even when the weight of change and the burden of working for what is right and just seems overwhelming at times. Our heads are bowed as we protect ourselves and pray for strength and discernment, and our eyes are focused straight ahead when it becomes time to act and make a difference.

As the saying goes, you can see much more when you are looking towards the front, than you ever will when you turn around and try to see what you've left behind.

Courage, character and commitment: the race is on, and the baton has been passed.